

Opening speech by Warwick Reeder, Director, Reed Fine Art

MARCO LUCCIO . 'PENTIMENTO' – Images of Paris and Florence

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Opening address by Warwick Reeder, Director, Reeder Fine Art

Three years ago I came across Marco Luccio's etchings, at his first solo show in Melbourne at the Dickerson Gallery, Richmond and was thrilled by what I saw. Here were some of the biggest and boldest etchings of Melbourne today. I had heard nothing about Marco and had never seen his work, yet I knew I was witnessing the launch of a new creative talent in printmaking.

Marco's previous exhibitions – *Movimento* and *La Citta* in 2004, and *Civilta* in 2005 take us on journeys to Melbourne and Sydney and *Pentimento* in 2006, takes us to Paris and Florence. Common to Marco's representation of all these great cities is his aerial perspective. This unusual viewpoint makes one feel like a super hero, or perhaps something less macho, a butterfly, flitting from one urban monolith to the next; poking down into canyons of city streets and elegant boulevards. If we are not flying we might as well be hanging out from the corner of a building or looking up to the sky to great engineering structures, such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge (seen in previous shows) or the Eiffel Tower in this exhibition. I feel a thrill just looking at the prints, but not as thrilled as Marco must have felt when he made his first impression on the plates or in his sketchbook up there in the sky somewhere!

I feel more secure when I look at his panoramic views of *Paris Triumphant*, but want to duck my head when I see the swinging crane masts and their baskets of concrete coming at me in his views of Spencer Street or the State Library. It is not only the power of the architectural viewpoint which is exciting, but it is the exuberance of the marks on the plate which motivate my eye— Marco's hand is present in every print. Every scrape, gouge, and indentation is visible – nothing is politely wiped away and made pretty. And speaking of wiping, the tone of these prints adds to their drama— a bluish black, burgundy-ochre black or green black, not just black ink. The strong arms and grunt that go into making these marks, the majority by drypoint rather than acid, show a great confidence and vision. This man gets around his plates using a variety of tools and implements, some of which we can see in one of the showcases. He usually doesn't muck around with preliminary sketches or photographs: he gets it down once and for all on-site, drawing directly on to the copper plate resting on his knees like a sketch artist working with his sketchbook. However, with the Paris and Florence series, Marco worked from sketches, some of which are also in the exhibition. The plates were prepared from sketches when he got home from overseas.

In previous shows, Marco has been drawn to the city for his subject. In doing so he has followed in the footsteps of some of the great masters of Australian etching, an arena which he is now very much part of. I would like to share a little history of the medium in which he works with you, so that you can see where he fits.

Etching in Australia has had two boom and bust periods. The first, from the 1890s until the 1920s, and again in the 1960s. With Marco as a catalyst, I think we are seeing another return to drypoint printing, first made popular by James McNeil Whistler and Charles Meryon in the 1890s. The National Gallery of Victoria helped to bring etching to Australia in 1891 when it bought prints by these, and other British artists. Such prints, were in turn, looked at by Australian artists such as Lionel Lindsay and John Shirlow.

One of the great pioneer printmakers of etching in Australia shares a heritage with Marco's cityscapes. I am thinking of John Shirlow, (1869-1936). Shirlow led the way in making etching fashionable in Melbourne. He taught etching at the Working Mens' College in 1929, which was later to become the RMIT University where Marco studied in 1992. Shirlow's subjects make an interesting comparison with Marco's work, perhaps not with this show, but with his shows in previous years – he too chose to draw Flinders Street Station, the main buildings and old streets and laneways of Melbourne to make prints in series. He made Melbourne synonymous with his name in the period 1920 to 1930.

Another printmaker who I admire and reminds me of Marco by the sheer beauty and invention of her work, is Jessie Trail (1881-1967). For those of you who have followed Marco's work you will have seen his striking images of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Take a look at Jessie Traill's Bridge series of six etchings from 1927-1931, made while the bridge was under construction. Influenced by the English painter and etcher Frank Brangwyn, Trail used aquatint and tone to make dynamic images of this great icon. Trail was unusual in making etchings, whereas most women of her generation were to take up relief printing - linocuts and woodcuts in black

and white, but more so in colour. In the 1930s intaglio printing - the medium in which Marco works, became unfashionable and suddenly nobody wanted to buy etchings anymore.

It wasn't until the early 1960s that intaglio printing became fashionable again. I want to briefly touch on this revival to demonstrate how a number of Marco's teachers and mentors were part of this revival and why we have a growing print market today. Of course Marco wasn't even born then, (not until 1969 in fact) but his teachers and mentors were graduating during this period and a few people started buying prints, not just museums.

Three things happened in Australia to bring about this revival. Firstly, an influx of overseas born artists arrived here in the 1950s; pioneering people like Udo Sellbach and Hertha Klugge Pott from Germany and Tate Adams from Ireland, who was later to set up in 1966, Melbourne's first dedicated print gallery called The Crossley Gallery in Crossley Lane. Secondly, the art schools set up printmaking courses and again the RMIT was a leader here. Tate Adams was one of the teachers of major printmakers such as Jan Senbergs and George Baldessin before he departed to set up Crossley Street. Both artists showed their prints with Tate Adams; in fact dozens of others did as well. Thirdly, the Print Council of Australia was established in 1966 by printmakers Grahame King and Udo Sellbach, assisted by the late Dr Ursula Hoff, then Curator of Prints at the NGV. The establishment of print studios in the major art schools meant that we had a new generation of printmakers, and in Crossley Gallery, a place to exhibit, and generate sales. This interest in prints spread to Sydney and the other states. Today printmaking is still advancing with the ongoing work of the Australian Printmakers Workshop, and Port Jackson Press in Fitzroy, as well as Chrysalis in East Melbourne and other print workshops all over the country. The majority of the prints in this exhibition were printed by Marco at The Baldessin Press, St Andrews and the tondo shaped etching at the Australian Print Workshop.

Two of Marco's mentors were part of this print revival and trained at RMIT. German born printmaker, Hertha Klugge Pott who taught him how to make drypoints and Daniel Moynihan allowed Marco to use his printing studio after graduation. Both printmakers are very supportive of Marco's development as a printmaker.

Marco's new work from Paris and Florence cannot escape an exotic feeling to it, simply by the name associations – history and place are so powerful. The lure of France, Spain and Italy continues to draw young artists. Marco has chosen the same landmarks that post war artists such as Donald Friend, Lloyd Rees, Brett Whiteley, George Baldessin and Daniel Moynihan have chosen – the Eiffel Tower, Montmartre, Montparnasse, the beautiful Ponts across the Seine and the streets of Florence and Venice. Yet despite our great familiarity with these places, Marco has managed to put his stamp on them through his printmaking style. These prints are not simply souvenirs; they have been added to Marco's vocabulary of world cities.

Despite Marco's particular compositional structure, mark-making and unique approach which he brings to his portfolio of cityscapes, in these images we can be assured that the skyline of Paris is pretty much as it was in the mid nineteenth century - balloons and all –only one modern skyscraper here, the Montparnasse Tower competing with the Eiffel Tower. Likewise the drypoints of Florence's *Il Duomo*, the *Uffizi and the Arno* and ancient streets such as *Via Tornabuoni* are much as they were in Michaelangelo's time. While we can draw some comfort from this, I like the way Marco allows us to see the unfamiliar and to make compositions which take them beyond the standard scenic view.

I guess the one thing that these images lack, is something we take for granted and have to cope with whenever we travel - a mass of people. Where have all the people gone? Have they been erased like some Surrealist dream? Or as the word *Pentimento* suggests, they are there, but have been covered up? We can see the under-drawing, the marks showing the build up of layers upon layers, a metaphor for the ancient cities that are the subject of these works. A closer examination of *Eiffel Tower* and *Paris Triumphant* reveals some squiggles for people, but Marco's metropolis's at first sight appear empty, like the classical architecture and statuary in a De Chirico painting? I will leave you my impressions while you enjoy looking at this beautiful series of drypoints, by a young master of the medium.

I want to congratulate Marco on this next phase of his printmaking journey. It now gives me great pleasure to declare open, *Marco Luccio. 'PENTIMENTO' – Images of Paris and Florence* .